

MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- FINAL
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Helena, MT
May 8-9, 2017 (Meeting 22)

Council Members: Joe Ball (absent), Sen. Jill Cohenour (absent), Rep. Rob Cook, Darlyne Dascher, Bill Howell, Mike Jensen (absent), Bill McChesney, Charlie Noland, Dustin Ramoie (absent), Craig Roberts, Josh Schrecengost, and Dale Tribby (Chair).

FWP Employees and Conservation Partners: Aaron, Clausen, Jake Doggett, Jeff Herbert, Debbie Hohler, Pat Howe, Bob Jeffrey (Big Sky Upland Bird Association—BSUBA), John Jeffries, Jason Kool, Ken McDonald, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Ken Plourde, Rick Sodja (Gallatin Valley Pheasants Forever Chapter—Habitat Chair), Graham Taylor, Scott Thompson, Ryan Weiss (DNRC Access Coordinator).

Monday, May 8

Dale began the meeting at 8:00 am, beginning with introductions. Dustin Ramoie had a family emergency and had to leave right away. Two new Council members were present: Darlyn Dascher (R6—Fort Peck) and Joshua Schrecengost (R4—Great Falls).

Rick Northrup gave an overview of the UGBEP and the role of the Council and the biannual meetings.

Dale recapped the minutes from the past meeting in Plentywood and provided an overview of this meetings agenda. **Correction** to Plentywood meeting minutes: “Mustard” should be changed to Yellow Sweet Clover.” **Charlie moved and Craig seconded. Minutes accepted with correction.**

The fall Council meeting was scheduled to meet in Lewistown October 2 and 3.

1. Legislative Highlights (McDonald):

- No changes were made to UGBEP operations (HB 2).
- Block Management will see an increase in payments to landowners, from \$11 to \$13/hunter day with a payment cap raised to \$15,000.
- The Legislature funded the Enforcement Division by 30% with Pittman-Robertson funding. This amounts to 65,000 hours or about 31 full-time positions. Some of this time will be dedicated to helping with UGBEP.
- The division requested a little over \$1 million spending authority for the UGBEP for the biennium (HB 5). Request was approved in the session.
- HB 211 – Legislature requires a sage-grouse population estimate report to EQC.

2. Strategic plan implementation and Program updates

Fiscal Report: Debbie provided a handout showing program revenue and anticipated expenditures through the next 5 years. Council requested that spreadsheets are separated by known and projected commitments to help clarify what is obligated (known) and what is available and estimated.

Open Fields: Council received an update on Open Fields enrollment and grant status. At this time, the program estimates approximately 16,000 acres of access (including ~10,500 CRP acres) may be enrolled this year. Comments from the Council indicate that Open Fields is well received by the hunters.

Pheasant Releases: Pheasant prices were established at \$9 per 10-week old bird and \$1.07 per loaded mile. Region 7 pheasant raiser notified they will not be supplying birds for 2017.

Program Database: The database is undergoing a major overhaul to improved efficiency, tracking, and processing. Testing will likely continue through the year.

3. Jason Kool, FWP Hunting Access Coordinator

Jason provided his background on some tasks he's been involved with since he began early April. Discussion over ways UGBEP and Block can complement one another.

4. Jake Doggett, Region 4

This year marks Jake's 3rd season on the job. He reviewed the regional strategic plan, anticipated work, and planning. Jake presented program information at regional CRP workshops. Emphasis will likely be on continuous CRP versus general CRP sign-ups.

5. Ken Plourde, Region 6

Ken provided an overview of the regional strategic plan and projects in the works. The loss of CRP has elevated the value of nesting and hiding cover. He has been looking at ways to improve food plots so that food and cover benefits are enhanced. Ken provided an overview of his monitoring routes to determine need for supplemental feeding. No feeding occurred this past winter.

Later on in the meeting, Dale would like more discussion on habitat management leases with input from the council and FWP.

6. Debbie provided habitat enhancement updates from regions 1, 3, 5, and 7.

Nesting and brood cover has been conducted on North Shore WMA (R1). Charlie Holtz is continuing efforts to renovate ag land to a more beneficial, native cover near the WPAs. Continued farming activities enhance pheasant habitats on the WMA. On Canyon Ferry (R3) food plot establishments and shelterbelt maintenance continue. Ben Hoese is settling in as the Habitat Specialist in Region 5. Veebaray (Region 7): project implementation is going slowly but the well was drilled with good production. Currently assessing whether there's a need for

additional wells (as outlined in the agreement) or alternatively transporting water via a pipeline system.

7. Craig Roberts, Pheasant Forever work in Denton area

Habitat enhancement and management continues on over 15,000 acres in the Denton-area complex. Older CRP was disked, and it was noted that the areas that had 2 passes has better results versus a single pass. Craig described Marshelder, an annual native forb, which provides good brood cover.

8. Rick Sodja, Habitat Chair, Gallatin Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever

The Chapter would like to collaborate more with UGBEP and put additional funding on the ground. Pheasants Forever provided funding for a project that surveys county extension agents. The agents were interested in upland game birds. Dale requested that Rick Sodja present results of the survey at our next fall meeting.

9. Cooperative Positions, Rick Northrup

Rick provided an overview of all the cooperative positions funded by partially by UGBEP and other FWP funding sources.

10. Dave Nikonow, NWTF Cooperative Biologist, R2

Dave provided the Council with an overview of work planned for this field season. The burn window for many projects has been hampered by increased moisture.

11. Council Feedback on Habitat Management Leases (HML)

HML can provide a funding/compensation mechanism to keep projects in the program without additional cost-share needs. Some concern was raised that these “jewels” could be over-hunted once enrolled in the program. When properties are evaluated for enrollment, the risk of conversion or history of ag use should be considered. Jake and Kenny feel there would be significant interest in their areas. Council requested an overview of habitat leases to date at the next meeting.

12. CRP updates, Aaron Clausen, PF Farm Bill Biologist

Aaron covers the east front areas and Liberty and Chouteau counties. He provided an overview of enrollment in CRP and EQIP and the number of contacts made by the Farm Bill Biologists annually. Aaron also provided a snapshot of CRP acres in Montana. At this time, he is not aware of any general sign-ups.

Tuesday, May 9

Dale provided an overview of topics for today's meeting. We will discuss the Program Cap and UGBEP projects.

1. Program Cap Discussion

Rick provided the council with proposed draft language that would update the strategic plan that addresses the \$100,000 program cap. The Council and department discussed at length how the cap would address conservation easements, expired contracts, concurrent contracts, or new landownerships. The council made the following recommendations:

- The department will rework the draft to include wording about easements and the items addressed in the discussion.
- The revised version will be sent top Dale, who in turn will route to the other Council members.
- There is commitment by the department to communicate with the council on projects that approach the \$100,000 cap.
- Conservation easements (in perpetuity) are not considered within the time constraint addressed in rule.
- After Dale receives feedback from the Council on the revised version, the department will seek concurrence from the Commission.

2. Meet and visit with FWP Director, Martha Williams

Martha thanked the council members for their dedication and commitment to the UGBEP. She discussed her visions on ways the agency can operate successfully as an agency. A question and answer period followed.

3. Permitting and dog training on wild birds, Mike Lee, FWP Commercial Permit Manager

Dale received calls from concerned citizens about commercial dog training on public lands. Dog trainers will bring many dogs on productive areas to train their dogs or their clients' dogs. Region 6 also reported this training has occurred over the years. Mike Lee provided an overview and interpretation of the current statute. One concern raised was training individual/personal dogs versus commercial. Several members of the public attended this portion of the meeting and provided comment.

Jeff Herbert, Helena Valley Gun Dog Club: Restrictions are in place in Canada and ND. He raised the concern of picking an area one mile from nesting cover would be next to impossible in eastern Montana. Bird dog groups would be willing to help develop regulations.

John Jeffries: Stated that decisions need to be science-based.

The Council did not officially provide a recommendation, but it was noted that dog interest groups expressed interest to help develop rule. Ken McDonald stated he will talk to the Enforcement Division on this topic.

4. Sharp-tails West of Divide

Debbie provided an overview of the report by Dr. Lance McNew and his class. The class is evaluating the potential to reintroduce sharp-tails west of the divide. Ben Deeble, Big Sky Upland Bird Association, gave an overview of the history of sharp-tails west of the divide.

5. Conservation Lease Agreement, Phillips County, Scott Thompson,

A 30-year conservation lease was approved on 10,400 acres. The lease restricts conversion. Approximately 8,400 ac. are native grasslands, and 2,500 ac. have a prairie pothole component. The 30-year lease pays \$30/acre ~ \$312,000. UGBEP contributing \$98,000, \$100,000 from Mig Bird, and \$113,000 NFWF grant. There are 336 annual hunter-days, which also include 37 recreational days.

6. Dale's Summary

- Strategic plan implementation and objectives
 - Expenditure and revenue – Debbie will provide dollars obligated and projected, more concise availability of funding
- Open Fields: the increase from 160 to 320 acres was of interest by landowners and well received by hunters and the council.
- Major pheasant producer in Baker area will not be available for providing birds for UGBEP. About 4,800 birds were anticipated from them this year. Dale would like to hear from R7 on this impact.
- Jason Kool's visit, recognized inconsistencies. Dale would like him back in one year.
- Strategic plan implementation presentations on all of the regions
- Cooperative positions review. Dale would like update on balance of time/funding left on these positions.
- David Nikonow – presented on his work with USFS on habitat improvements.
- Question about Aspen work in Regions 3 and 5. Dale would like to get an update in the fall.
- Farm Bill update by Aaron Clauson.
- Visit by Martha Williams highlighted.
- Review of dog training topic.

7. Membership Terms, Dale Tribby

Council memberships intended to be 2 or 4-year staggered terms. The Council has matured, we may need to talk about rotations at the next meeting. Dale asked if any of the members wanted to leave the Council. No interest at this time.

8. Ryan Weiss, DNRC Access Coordinator

Ryan gave an overview of his position. He has been on the job for 6 months. He works statewide with the real estate and management bureaus. Debbie will add Ryan to the Councils email list.

9. Public Comments

Pat Howe: Appreciates the work of the Council; the work is important. He would like to see more focus on nesting cover on WMAs, especially with the decline of CRP. He recommends focus on private lands. Agrees that conservation easements separate from project caps. He thought it was good to have Mike Lee give a presentation on training dogs.

Ben Deeble: He is a fan of sharp-tailed grouse. There has been a significant loss in CRP and we don't know the effects on STG. Ben is also an avid hunter of sage grouse. The season length is on par with neighboring states, but it is early. It tends to be hot and snaky this early. October seems to make more sense for a hunting season.

No other comments.

10. Dale adjourned the meeting at 3:30.